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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

COMMODORE HENRY EAGLE,

FROM

Encyclopædia of Contemporary Biography

OF

NEW YORK,

VOL. III.



PUBLISHED BY
ATLANTIC PUBLISHING AND ENGRAVING COMPANY,
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1883.



Henry Vogt
U. S. Navy

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COMMODORE HENRY EAGLE.

COMMODORE HENRY EAGLE, United States Navy, was born on Broadway, New York city, April 7th, 1801, and died at his residence in East Thirtieth street, New York, November 26th, 1882. His father, a native of the city of Dublin, Ireland, was major of an Irish brigade, belonging to the troops of his adopted city, and during the war of 1812 was stationed on Long Island, and assisted in throwing up and preparing earthworks near Fort Greene. The family residence, though on the site since rendered famous by Stewart's retail store, was then in the country, a mile and a half distant from the settled portion of the city. The mother of our subject, (Christiana Bull), also of Dublin, died in 1816, but his father lived until 1852. Two brothers of the elder Eagle were in the British military service; one was a surgeon: the other went to the East Indies, rose to the rank of major, married a titled lady, and died in 1814. Henry Eagle, Jr., entered the United States Navy on New Year's Day, 1818, and passed about a year on the seventy-four-gun ship Independence, then used as a school-ship for midshipmen in Boston Harbor. His naval service began on a vessel whose history was calculated to awaken his youthful ardor and keep his patriotic duty in mind. In 1812 Commodore Decatur, commanding the frigate United States, captured the British frigate Macedonian, after a desperate resistance, with slight American loss. The vessel was greatly damaged, but had been refitted and attached to the American navy. Midshipman Eagle sailed in the frigate, under command of Captain Downs, for the Pacific coast of South America, then passing from the feeble grasp of Spain. Seven days after leaving Boston the vessel lost her masts in a se-

vere storm, but succeeded by the aid of jury masts in reaching Norfolk, Va., where damages were repaired. While at Panama an incident occurred illustrating his generous impulses, not yet fully curbed by conventional rules. A young English surgeon, named Kernan, belonging to the expedition of Sir Gregor McGregor, had been captured with others during the attack on Porto Bello, and marched across the country to Panama, where he was placed in the chain gang and condemned to be a street scavenger. The owner of a drug store ascertaining his profession, obtained permission to employ him. Young Eagle, who visited the store, learned the facts, and taking another midshipman into his confidence, rescued and secreted the prisoner on board the ship, though fired on six or eight times while making the attempt. On demand of the viceroy, Captain Downs made search, without discovering the surgeon until after he had put to sea. One of the most valued souvenirs in possession of the Commodore's surviving family is a letter written by Kernan, warmly expressing his gratitude for deliverance from a captivity which would doubtless have ended in death. At this period the gallant General SanMartin, who had conquered liberty for Chili, was engaged in efforts for emancipating Peru. Aided by the governments of Chili and Buenos Ayres, he had fitted out an expedition to attack Lima, while a naval armament, the command of which had been given to Lord Cockrane, blockaded Callao. Having occasion to visit the port, Captain Downs was informed by the American consul at Valparaiso, that the Chilean commander had sent word that he would sink the Macedonian if she attempted to enter the harbor. The independence of Chili not having yet been acknowledged by any na-

tion, Captain Downs proceeded on his way. On his approach Lord Cockrane came out to meet him with several vessels of war, and the decks of the Macedonian were cleared for action. To Lord Cockrane's demand, Captain Downs returned answer that he could not respect the blockade, as it was not enforced by a national squadron. The Macedonian sailed up the harbor, followed by the Chilian fleet, expecting an attack every moment, and cast anchor just beyond reach of the forts on shore. Midshipman Eagle was Captain Downs' aid, and familiar with all the correspondence and intentions of the commander. The next day, as they neared the shore, two of the forts commenced firing on the American frigate, under the impression that it belonged to the Chilian squadron, but when the mistake was discovered an apology was offered. A few weeks later, about midnight, Midshipman Eagle was on deck and saw a line of Chilian boats approaching the ship with muffled oars. Order was at once issued for officers and men to assemble at their quarters. On communicating with the boats it was learned that they were bound for the Spanish frigate *Esmeralda*, moored with other war vessels under the guns of the Peruvian forts. In a short time the firing and clashing of small arms and cutlasses denoted the attack, and after a half-hour of desperate fighting the groans of the wounded and dying, and the shouts of the victors proclaimed the result. The *Esmeralda* was cut out, and the last vestige of the Spanish naval power in the Pacific annihilated. As the captured frigate drifted near the Macedonian, the forts commenced firing on both vessels, and the Macedonian received considerable damage before she could get out of range. A boat was sent ashore the next morning, which was received with a volley of musketry, wounding several of the men. It subsequently appeared that these acts of hostility had been occasioned by the belief that the Macedonian was rendering aid to the Chilian fleet. A demand for redress was treated with courtesy, but the viceroy was unable to do much more than furnish an escort from Lima for Captain Downs and twenty masters and supercargoes of American merchantmen, who were taken by the Macedonian's boats to their respective vessels. The frigate returned to Boston in June, 1821, and a few days afterwards Midshipman Eagle was attacked on Charlestown

Bridge by one of the sailors whom he had caused to be punished for misconduct, and who had threatened to kill him. While defending himself, other persons approached and the man fled. It was the custom of the period for midshipmen to go into the merchant service to gain experience. Accordingly, after being stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard until the latter part of 1822, young Eagle took a voyage as a sailor on the American ship *Beaver* to the East Indies and China, without special incident, except that he came near being lost overboard in a heavy squall. His salary on this cruise was half pay from the Government, \$115 per annum. After this voyage, he was for a time on duty in the Navy Yard, and was then transferred to the man-of-war brig *Enterprise*, fitting out for a cruise in the West Indies after pirates. Five or six months were passed in this way, when the vessel was totally wrecked on the uninhabited island, called Little Curaçoa. One of the lieutenants and Midshipman Eagle were sent to Curaçoa to charter and prepare a vessel for taking home the officers and crew. This was satisfactorily accomplished, and on his return he was ordered to the sloop of war *Erie*, of the Mediterranean squadron. In the harbor of Syracuse, where the vessels were quarantined, two of the *Erie's* boats were torn from their moorings by a violent gale. Young Eagle was dispatched to tow them back, and a second boat was sent to his assistance from the flag-ship *Constitution*. Night coming on, the *Constitution's* boat was driven ashore and dashed to pieces in the surf, and the *Erie's* boat was in imminent danger. After exhausting efforts one of the men mutinied, and Eagle applied force personally to compel him to do his duty. The night was consumed in abortive attempts to regain the vessel, from which rockets and blue-lights were thrown up to show its position. In the morning the *Constitution* was reached, but as the midshipman was going up the stern ladder he fell back into the water from sheer exhaustion. A violent sickness was induced by the night's exposure, and five attending surgeons of the fleet gave up all hope of his recovery, but on arriving at Messina he was taken to a hotel for better accommodations, and in a few weeks was able to resume duty. The squadron touched at several of the Grecian islands. War was raging between the Greeks and Turks, and the massacre on the Island of

Scio had taken place a short time before. While at anchor in the Archipelago, a boat manned by Turks approached and offered some of the captive women and children for sale. Meeting with refusal, they threatened to take their victims ashore and kill them, but were pursued and the prisoners were rescued. Some weeks were spent at the port of Smyrna, and then the fleet separated, and the Erie sailed for Algiers, arriving there just after the British consul had been falsely accused by the Dey of appropriating to himself a portion of the English tribute and had embarked for Malta, leaving his residence, property and papers in the care of the American consul, Mr. Shaler. That official refused the demand of the Dey for delivery, and threatened to haul down his flag if he was interfered with. The officers of the Erie were invited to visit Mr. Shaler, and Mr. Eagle shared his hospitality. Sailing from Malta, they were again entertained at a grand fête given by the authorities to the Marquis and Marchioness of Hastings, who had arrived there. The British consul and his family were present, and extraordinary marks of attention were lavished on the American officers, on account of the assistance rendered by our consul at Algiers, whose course, when known, was sustained by our Government. During the year 1825 the Erie visited the Bay of Naples, Lord Byron being there at the time cruising in the yacht on which he wrote one of his celebrated poems. Byron would frequently invite parties of ladies and gentlemen to enjoy a sail with him, but when he felt inclined to write, no matter under what circumstances, he would immediately take up his pen and in a dictatorial manner command all the noise and revelry to cease, and then write until he was wearied. He visited the Erie often, and on one occasion remained on board quite late, forgetting, in his conviviality, an engagement he had to escort Lady Blessington to the opera, until she appeared in her launch alongside and her name was announced to the startled company. Mr. Eagle was commissioned lieutenant March 3, 1827, and in that and the following year cruised again in the West Indies in the sloop-of-war Natchez, where on one occasion he commanded the launch, and with another boat's crew attacked and routed a pirate schooner. Toughened by his adventures, and being a good sailor, brave and judicious,

he was well fitted for such expeditions. The pirates, whenever found, were chased to their retreats, their huts and boats burned, and property recovered. Returning, he was sent to the Brazils in the frigate Hudson, the flag-ship of the squadron, and remained on that station for some years. In 1833 he married Minerva, the daughter of Sheldon Smith, a gallant Connecticut soldier of the war of 1812, and at one time a part owner with Cornelius Vanderbilt of the steamboat Caroline, named after his eldest daughter, which plied between Bridgeport and New York. Selling out to Vanderbilt, he went to Newark, N. J., where he planned and constructed its reservoirs and water-works. Mr. Smith was also associated with Anson G. Phelps in founding the manufacturing village of Birmingham, Conn., and afterwards in promoting its interests. His death occurred in 1863. Lieutenant Eagle, after his marriage, was attached to the receiving ship at New York, and in 1834 sailed again for the Brazilian station in the sloop Erie, where he passed a second period of several years. He was stationed at the rendezvous at New York in 1840, and the next two years cruised in the Pacific Ocean on the sloop-of-war Yorktown, when he was placed in command of the schooner Shark, and served two years more on the Pacific station. He was commissioned commander June 4th, 1844. On his return he was detailed to superintend the construction of the Stevens iron battery at Hoboken, to which he devoted several years, acting as inspector in New York in 1846. The Mexican War called him to the Gulf, where he commanded the bomb vessel *Ætna* and a division of five vessels of the squadron. Taking Frontera, the seaport of the fertile province of Tobasco, in southern Mexico, noted for its superior dye-woods and mahogany and other valuable timber, he was appointed civil and military Governor of the province and Collector of the Port. The imports were principally from this country. He performed the duties of his dual office so acceptably, increasing the revenue, opening schools, and encouraging people to industry, that on the restoration of peace they besought him to remain, declaring that he had lightened their burdens and elevated their condition. Subsequently to the war he was on special service. In 1853 he was sent to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and adjacent waters, in command of the steamer

Princeton of the home squadron, to protect the interests of our fishermen. After a year or more spent in this service, Captain Eagle was, in November, 1854, ordered to cruise in the Princeton in search of the missing sloop-of-war Albany, commanded by his old friend, Commander Gerry, who had sailed from Aspinwall September 25th, 1854. After a fruitless cruise of two months through the Caribbean Sea and the West Indies, all hope was abandoned: the Albany was never heard from. September 14th, 1855, he was commissioned captain. On the first overt act of rebellion in 1861, he was the bearer of important communications from the commandant of the Brooklyn Navy Yard to Washington. Having accomplished his mission, he asked for immediate active service. The only command then available was that of the gunboat Monticello, which, though not equal to his rank, he willingly accepted, arriving in Hampton Roads within a few days after the fall of Fort Sumter. During the remainder of April and the month of May he blockaded the James and Elizabeth Rivers. On the 19th of May he made the first naval attack of the war and silenced the guns of the battery at Sewell's Point, one of the defenses of Norfolk. In connection with this memorable attack, he subsequently received an official letter from Hon. Gideon Welles, then Secretary of the Navy, in which was stated: "The Department cannot withhold the expression of its high appreciation of your promptitude and gallantry." The command of the frigate Santee was now ready for him, and he sailed for the Gulf, and passed two years principally in blockading Pensacola, Florida, and Galveston, Texas, during which time he captured several vessels, including the privateer Royal Yacht. While blockading Galveston, Captain Eagle requested of Farragut that he be assigned to duty in the contests on the Mississippi River, to which Farragut wrote in reply: "Your turn will come, I hope soon, for active employment in rougher work." This wish to have Eagle with him in the Mississippi fight, was not, however, to be realized, for the Santee, although a splendid frigate, was unfit and unable to do the work of a steamer in running past forts, etc. It was Eagle's misfortune that in volunteering so soon for service, he had to be given a sailing vessel. He received his commission as commodore, July 16th, 1862, and on the

1st of January following, having reached the age of sixty-two, was placed on the retired list. He was, however, assigned to active duty again, and was prize commissioner in New York in 1864, and a part of 1865, and for a year later, inspector of light-houses at the South. His later years were mainly passed in New York in the companionship of his family and numerous friends, by whom he was much esteemed. From the year 1870, he was a member of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, and after serving for two or three years as vice-commander, he was elected commander, and occupied that station for two successive years. After his death, at a stated meeting of the Commandery, held at Delmonico's, February 7, 1883, the following report was adopted:

"In the death of Commodore Henry Eagle the Commandery has cause to deplore the loss of one of its patriotic, gallant and distinguished companions. He leaves to us a noble example of fidelity, devotion and efficiency in the service of our country, and the commendable character of an upright, Christian sailor. * * * * * (*Here follows his official record*). Commodore Eagle was one of the oldest members of this Commandery, and greatly attached to it: he attended its deliberations, (often as presiding officer), as long as his health and strength would permit. Be it therefore,

Resolved, That this Commandery hereby desires to commemorate and record its high appreciation of the eminent services of its late companion, its esteem for his generous and amiable character, and its deep regret for the loss the Commandery has sustained.

Resolved, That this Commandery hereby tender to his bereaved family, its heartfelt sympathy in this their sore affliction.

Resolved, That a copy of this memorial be sent to the family of the deceased, and a copy be furnished for publication in the *Army and Navy Journal*.

HENRY WATKES,

Rear Admiral U. S. N., (Ret'd).

JOHN M. SCHOFIELD,

Major General U. S. A.

HENRY W. SLOCUM,

*Major General U. S. V.
Committee."*

Commodore Eagle was also a member of the Association of Mexican Veterans. Among his life-long friends were such men as William E. Dodge, Admiral Farragut, Hamilton Fish, Wilson G. Hunt, Alexander S. Webb, and others distinguished in our State and Na-

tional history. His tastes were simple and his manners kindly and unostentatious. He never used tobacco or liquor and was never heard to swear. When grog was served in the navy he drew his allowance the same as other officers, and it was often wondered what he did with it, until it was eventually discovered that he used it for external application when he went below after being wet through on watch. He attended the same church that Admiral Farragut did, and, after the latter's death, sat for years in a pew facing the mural tablet erected to the memory of that officer by the Loyal Legion, of which Farragut was the first commander. Twice regularly, every Sunday, during the latter years of his life, as long as his strength would permit, Commodore Eagle was to be seen at church, an earnest and attentive communicant. He was buried at Woodlawn Cemetery within a hundred feet of his old comrade Farragut. Of the many pleasant mementoes which the family have received from admiring friends since the Commodore's death, one is specially prized, it being a letter from a former

cabin boy of his, now seventy-one years of age, and who had never seen or heard of his old commander since, until informed of his death. He writes, "I never forgot the favor to a runaway boy, as he first taught me the compass, and was the means of my promotion. * * * While on board the sloop-of-war Natchez, Lieutenant Buchanan outranked Mr. Eagle, and it was much talked of among the officers and crew. The sailors all said Buchanan was a fine gentleman, but Eagle was the best sailor, as he could both throw the lead, hand reef and steer, and make any knot or splice, while Buchanan could only give orders." Commodore Eagle's widow survives him, and four of their nine children, two sons and two daughters. Clifford F. served as captain in the Union army during the Rebellion; Clarence H. is in the militia service, having been connected with the Seventh Regiment for eight years; Isabel C. married Fitch W. Smith of New York; and Ida M. married Thomas H. Messenger of Brooklyn.

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